



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 30, 2004

## SOLDIERS OF V CORPS' 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION CELEBRATE DEPLOYED CHRISTMAS IN IRAQ

By Spc. Ismail Turay Jr.  
196th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

**FORWARD OPERATING BASE DAGGER, TIKRIT, Iraq --** In spite being in a combat zone, the Christmas spirit was not lost on Soldiers on duty in Iraq with V Corps' 1st Infantry Division.

Presents and celebrations -- with a distinctly military twist -- still managed to find their way to corps Soldiers deployed in the region, thanks to the efforts of troops and their families.

With the help of his mother, Capt. Aaron Titko collected hundreds of presents for Soldiers in his battalion.

While delivering presents, Titko dressed in the typical St. Nick "uniform" of bright red fur trimmed in white, but also wore body armor and a Kevlar helmet and carried an M4 rifle -- just in case insurgents attacked Santa's convoy. Jolly Old Saint Nick's "sleighs" were several up-armored Humvees, and the "elves" who accompanied him on his gift-giving rounds toted enough firepower to destroy a small town.



SPC ISMAIL TURAY JR.  
Capt. Aaron Titko of the 9th Engineer Battalion of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division shows off the Santa suit he wore on Christmas when he delivered presents to 550 Soldiers from the battalion who are deployed in seven northern Iraqi cities.

"We will have a lot of .50-caliber (machine guns) ... for the bad boys and girls," Titko joked two days before Christmas at Forward Operating Base Ramagen here, where he commands the Headquarters and Headquarters Company of the division's 9th Engineer Battalion. "I think the worst thing that could happen is that we get attacked and the insurgents kill Santa. That wouldn't be cool."

The captain spent all day Christmas delivering the presents to the battalion's 550 Soldiers in seven northern Iraqi cities. The project, dubbed Operation

Santa Claus was Titko's idea. He said he wanted to do something nice for his Soldiers during the holidays, so none would "sit in their rooms and feel sorry for themselves."

Last summer, Titko says, he asked his troops to list three items they wanted for Christmas, and he'd find a way to get them one present. He then sent the lists to his mother, Jean Eberle, at home in Pickerington, Ohio, and asked her to find people to buy a gift for each Soldier.

Most of the troops asked for DVDs, CDs, magazine subscriptions, disposable cameras and even soft toilet paper. One Soldier even asked for beer because, "I think he knew he couldn't have it," Eberle said, laughing.

Eberle contacted friends, relatives and co-workers and asked local radio and television stations to announce the project. She said the response was overwhelming, with individuals, companies and organizations as far away as California, New Jersey and Georgia sending donations.

"The American people are really great when it comes to supporting our military," Eberle said. "Give them a project and they will take off and run with it."

Staff Sgt. Mark Dennler, an Army Reservist attached to the division, said he actually participated in the largest Christmas dinner of his life here.

Dennler, a member of the Cleveland, Ohio-based 350th Psychological Operations Company, is stationed at FOB Danger here. Last Christmas, Dennler says, he woke up to the bright smiles on his four children's faces, a beautiful tree and buzzing battery-operated toys. This year, he woke up with an empty feeling on a gray day filled with rain.

"It just wasn't Christmas," he said. "I like my guys here, but they are not family. Christmas is all about family. I was a little saddened by it."

His wife, Holly, cried when he called home, he added.

But Dennler also said being without his family on Christmas morning gave him a chance to reflect on what he has and doesn't have, and helped him better appreciate his family and the things he does have.

One of the things he had was Christmas dinner with hundreds of Soldiers on FOB Danger and was off duty most of the day off duty -- his first off-duty time since his unit arrived in Iraq several months ago.

Still while Dennler said he was happy to be off duty, he was bored.

1st Lt. Raven Burkowski of the division's 101st Military Intelligence Battalion is stationed here on FOB Dagger. Burkowski helped keep up the holiday spirit there by decorating a dining hall in a palace that once belonged to Saddam Hussein palaces, and organized Christmas dinner there for Soldiers of her brigade. She and several other Soldiers even entertained the troops during a talent show.

Burkowski and some of her fellow Soldiers convoyed to a nearby base on Christmas morning to pick up the dinner for the 2nd Brigade Combat Team.

In the past, the lieutenant said, she felt like a child as she opened presents on Christmas. But this year, Burkowski said, she felt more like a parent, because she has so many responsibilities and is in charge of a handful of Soldiers.

Burkowski said she talked with her family Christmas morning, but said the conversation was brief and not emotional.

"I really wish we could all be together, but I just haven't had the time to sit and realize how sad it is," she said.



SPC ISMAIL TURAY JR.

1st Lt. Raven Burkowski of V Corps' 101st Military Intelligence Battalion (center) gets a present from Santa during the Christmas dinner she organized for Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of 1st Infantry Division at Forward Operating Base Dagger in Tikrit, Iraq.

